

Press Freedom for Better Nepal: Dynamize the Nepali Minds

A Concept Paper by Mohan Nepali presented at a seminar in Kathmandu

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Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.¹

Concept of Press Freedom

The very concept of press freedom is rooted in human nature. Human beings have a reasoning mind technology. They plan and self-control their actions.² They are free thinkers though it is not possible for them to become absolutely free doers because of their co-existence principles developed by themselves. They determine many things through their communication. Exploring and communicating (sharing), this is their naturally reproducing habit. Their creations travel and expand through communication behavior, resulting in the expansion of the human society as a whole. For this reason, it is seen and believed communication is behavior and behavior is communication. Some scholars emphasize on the idea that communication is human behavior. Thus, the concept of press freedom is founded on the communicative nature of human life.

Their scientifically operating brain has an infrastructure for conceptualization. They possess a highly developed reasoning brain with mechanisms for cognitive processes.³ Of course, their major cognitive processes include reasoning, belief systems, conclusions, actions, feelings, language, introspection, and problem-solving. The mass media, mainly, the print media, the broadcast media (including films) and the online media represent these unique cognitive processes of human life. However, the exposure of facts and the freedom of opinion and expression are not that easy as the human society is full of contradictions, also manifested in the political, socio-economic and religious-cultural settings in different countries. Differences in such settings in different countries create different types of perceptions at state and public levels. In this context, the political systems in different parts of the world do not perceive the idea of press freedom in the same universally defined way. The Windhoek Declaration of 3 May 1991 (Namibia), issued at a UNESCO-supported gathering of African journalists, has contributed to making the issue of press freedom a global agenda, now widely linked to democracy and human rights on an international scale. The Windhoek themes of **free, independent and pluralistic** media gained global attention. Basically drawing

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

² ² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_brain

³ Kirwin, Christopher. 1995. 'Reasoning'. In Ted Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: p. 748

on the Windhoek principles, the media institutions and media workers worldwide observe May 3 with their locally vital slogans.

The Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) has decided to observe the World Press Freedom 2013 with its theme: *Democratic Constitution through the Constituent Assembly Elections: Our Campaign for the Protection of Independence and the Wellbeing of Working Journalists*. As a federation of working journalists, its theme is logical and quite relevant in the context of Nepal.

This occasion can also be used academically, linking the issue of press freedom to conceptualizing a better nation.

It is an academic as well as professional belief that an essential feature of democracy is press freedom without which democracy loses its meaning. In a democracy, media are not tools to impose authorities' wishes on people. Instead, media bridge people and the state—their collective functioning mechanism. A remarkable reality in applying democracy at grassroots level is that the state draws all kinds of mental and physical power from people, especially informational raw materials for formulating strategies and programs. Without this connectivity maintained by the mass media between the people and the state, democracy would remain far worse.

Needless to say, press freedom is a provision to represent people from multiple perspectives. It is not possible for a few hundred elected representatives to reach millions of people simultaneously on their own; the mass media makes this possible. This is why press freedom matters as regards the vital representation of millions of people far and near.

For centuries, democracy has been talked of as the public affairs system guided by people's will. However, democracy itself is either comparatively better nourished or undernourished, depending much on the degree of press freedom available and the quality of information that people own. As one American politician, Adlai Ewing Stevenson II, is often quoted as saying "The free press is the mother of all our liberties and of our progress under liberty," press freedom is vital in protecting and promoting human rights. Civil and political rights, economic and social rights, and religious and cultural rights can be reported and advocated only in case of the availability of press freedom. Violations and impunity further multiply in absence of press freedom. Therefore, a RIGHT for rights, press freedom is. Freedom of freedoms, it is. And it is a right right. There are some who still believe it is a wrong right. The meaning of liberties that scholars often refer to is from betterment perspectives.

There is much *raison d'être* behind media workers' engagement in pro-freedom fight: they want to be safe while pursuing their profession because it entails people's rights, including the specific right to information. People cannot enjoy their constitutionally

guaranteed right to freedom of opinion and expression if journalism is threatened. Universally formalized right to freedom of opinion and expression refers to the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. (UDHR, Article 19). Even when a parliament may have been dissolved, journalists can represent people's voices. This genuine role must be undermined neither by journalists themselves nor by any other stakeholders in the country.

Press Freedom to Fulfill Journalistic Obligations

There are some globally accepted principles of journalism, which one cannot ignore while contextualizing the advocacy of press freedom in Nepal, especially with reference to the concept of better Nepal. To make journalism more productive, responsible and independent, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2003) have the following to enumerate:

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
8. It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
9. Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

Indeed, these obligations are important clues to utilize press freedom in the best interest of people. Should there be an atmosphere to exercise these obligations in a professional and dignified way, the Nepali society will be more dynamic in the envisioned direction.

Press Freedom for Better Nepal

No matter how weak Nepal's political leaderships have appeared in effectively interpreting in public the norms and values contained in the historical Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed between the then Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the Seven Party Alliance, the CPA carries historical importance because it has clearly represented the Nepali's political movements from 1950 to 2006. Another aspect of its historical importance is that it is explicit in expressing the majority of Nepalis' wish for the political and socio-economic transformation of their lives. Incorporating the concept of transformation, the CPA expresses its determination for the 'progressive restructuring' of the Nepali society. However, the signing parties' inner interest in their claim of 'progressive restructuring' sounds vague as they have used another

terminology ‘democratic restructuring’. Communist parties and non-Communist parties might have had their own connotative interpretations regarding the two distinct terminologies—‘progressive restructuring’ and ‘democratic restructuring’. However, the core meaning of this expression for the majority of Nepalis must be big changes in various spheres of their life. Nevertheless, the current doldrums demonstrate that the parties were compelled to accept the historical need for vast changes in the country without having internalized the same in their deeper psychology.

Amidst the political thunderstorms marked by people’s emotive ventilations of their age-old sufferings, the parties dared not to compromise against the ignited Nepalis. As a result, the parties documented their promises for the ‘economic, social and cultural transformation’ in the very Preamble of the accord. Was it done just to calm down the agitated masses? This remains a subtle question for all the stakeholders to exercise over—at least to seek credible actions that could clear away this particular doubt.

In point 3 of the CPA, the terms ‘political-economic-social transformation and conflict management’ have been used. Although these terms mainly reflect a strong presence of the former Maoist rebels in the peace agreement, the other signing parties opposed to the former rebels had no other option except to accept them, the reason clearly being the principle that democratic parties in principle always have to uphold the concept of political, and socio-economic transformation in a society like ours where democracy has been made a phony talk misled by intergenerational oligarchies under which most of the vital public issues such as public security, education, health, public transport, food and drinking water are overshadowed. In principle, the formal interest demonstrated by the Nepali political stakeholders in the nation’s conflict transformation through the political and socio-economic transformation of the Nepali society backed up by the state restructuring is highly encouraging. The formal interest demonstrated in documents requires frequent communication and referential discourses across the nation. The mass media and their communication resources are instrumental in doing this.

Agenda Within Agenda

We have come across wide-ranging writings and advocacy in favor of state transparency, good governance and institutional accountability. There is nothing wrong in favoring such transparency. However, Nepali political parties have deliberately maintained their nontransparency for long. In informal discussions, they may talk more elusively, or they may even give their own logic, showing practical difficulties. While the people even cannot imagine about the subtle nature of megabillionaires who strategically invest their money in political parties and reap huge profits, the people at least can guess that politics has not mobilized money but vice versa. The exorbitant prices and the existing anomalies in the markets clearly indicate that there is a horrible level of nontransparency and ill-governance in the country. The media as the most

organized type of watchdogs try to expose many things but in vain because lack of transparency is what disappoints them time and again. Equally important in this context is the transparency of the mass media themselves. They will have little moral courage to pressurize other stakeholders to become transparent unless they become transparent themselves. This is important because Nepal, situated between India and China, has extreme geopolitical sensitivity though we have often ignored this fact while planning our actions at home.

While questions have been raised over the quality and credibility of journalism and journalism education, the questions also go to mushrooming media, many of which are either politically motivated or commercially driven, with little interest in journalism and public interests. Policy debates are required to address such issues as they closely affect the use and orientation of press freedom.

It would be better if media owners would not understand press freedom as their sole entrepreneurial freedom, with little consideration for public interests. While journalists, at the risk of their own life, try to inform people as part of their public responsibility, it is obvious that media workers are entitled to press rights to work for people's rights.

Diverse media-related workshops and training sessions are conducted in various parts of the country. Policy debates and theoretical approaches regarding communication, mass communication and journalism could be improvement measures regarding the utilization of press freedom.

Editorial policies and even working parameters to make the most qualitative use of press freedom could be important tools for media workers. The concept of who uses press freedom for whom for what purpose and how would be reflected better in the following agenda, which would also be compatible with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA):

- *Press freedom for moral transformation:* A sense developed out of wisdom and good intention, morality is an abstract concept of defining do's and don'ts for human beings from co-existence perspectives. It is something more guided by self-conscience and noble honesty rather than by preachings and advocacy. This is the most neglected agenda in political communication. Since moral crisis breeds myriads of crises, the agenda of moral transformation can be a sphere of wide-ranging and frequent communication. This is vital because the criminalization of generations will accelerate further if this is not incorporated into public communication. The impact of moral transformation efforts through mass media is expected on the production of more reliable generations or citizens, with a sense of accountability to society. Today, at the cost of a large majority, few benefit. This debased morality will never help the Nepali society get transformed positively. Debased morality will decompose the society. Good children can become good human beings. Good human beings can become

good politicians, good journalists, good lawyers, good engineers and more. In this context, efforts to utilize press freedom also for the moral transformation of the Nepali society would not sound a matter of mockery for sane people because moral transformation determines the quality of political transformation in the long run. Look at 10-year-olds today. They become 20-year-olds after 10 years. They are Nepal. Nepal becomes as much as they are. We have ignored the simplest truth like this.

- *Press freedom for political transformation:* Reviewing how much attention we have given to the agenda of political transformation is essential today. The more politically untransformed the Nepali society remains, the wilder the behavioral culture against press freedom will be. Political transformation is not about mere paper work. It is the change in mindset and psychological patterns in leaderships and voters. Political culture includes moral culture as a special ingredient. Political transformation is not an end product. It is an ever-going phenomenon. The more politically transformed we are, the nobler qualities we manifest in our communication and behavior. Today's vituperative politicking clearly points out to the need of political transformation in Nepal. Press freedom, though not an elixir, is a facility to address this agenda for public causes.
- *Press freedom for economic transformation:* Our policy communication is very weak. We mix political rhetoric everywhere. Rhetoric alone cannot feed people. Policy research and analysis should originally belong to Nepal. What is our economic system? What economic systems to follow in the Terai, the Hills and the Mountains? What about the economy in the Karnali Zone? What about the economy of the remotest East? Similarly, Why do we have a huge trade deficit? Are we managing resources (material and human) effectively at home? Why do we make a national policy of exporting Nepali youth energy abroad through Foreign Employment Promotion Board? When the state itself pursues a promotional strategy of sending abroad as many youths as possible through a special promotional mechanism, when will we adopt a balanced economic system that manages between export and import? Are the remittances to which one frequently refers are our permanent strategy? Are the taxes really collected in Nepal? These and many other questions come under the realm of the agenda of economic transformation requiring frequent communication.
- *Press Freedom for Social Transformation:* Victimological perspectives have not been noticed among those who usually hold power in the state organs and their subordinate mechanisms. Deep-rooted social discriminations undermine social harmony, national unity and political sovereignty. They de-humanize people. There are myriads of social issues for those opting for specialization. For current affairs communicators, there is no limitation to reporting and following up issues related to social discriminations. This is a special social responsibility of media and media workers, as written in their academic books.
- *Press Freedom for Cultural Transformation:* Culture is a way of thinking and behaving. The way we speak, the way we express our opinions, experiences, likes and dislikes, all demonstrate a cultural identity of ours. The heritages and rituals and symbols we use to represent ourselves or society belong to cultural realm. But culture is a product of mind-matter interaction. We live material life.

We use sensory organs to experience. We process information about what we see, hear, read or do. Communicators use their mind to process the facts and data that they have. They build culture. News is a cultural product. So are views. A talk show helps to reproduce culture. An entertainment program presenter is not only a communicator but also a cultural character for the society. Thus, cultural perspectives can be found everywhere. For changing the nation better, there is unlimited room for those interested in utilizing press freedom for cultural transformation.

Conclusion

Press freedom is a product of inherent human character. It serves the purpose of public empowerment, which is essential for democracy. Mediapersons are believed to have used press freedom not for their individual intentions but for public wellbeing. They have the potential to use press freedom for making Nepal better, provoking dynamic thoughts among the Nepali generations. The political, socio-economic and cultural transformation of the Nepali society can be the strategic agenda for communicators to exercise their conscience and wisdom.

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